



## **Texas House Committee on Higher Education**

### ***Houston Community College Response Relating to Interim Charge 1***

September 1, 2020

Thank you for the opportunity to provide the Committee on Higher Education with information regarding the implementation of certain legislation passed by the 86th Legislature. Our responses to the relevant considerations are available immediately below.

#### **HB 1638**

Houston Community College (“HCC”) specifically addresses HB 1638 (85R), which *relates to statewide goals for dual credit programs – review best practices for providing opportunities to high schools to earn college credit while ensuring that courses taken reflect authentic, college-level rigor.*

#### **Challenges Prior to the Pandemic**

Prior to the pandemic, many dual credit courses had limited access to virtual learning. While some schools deployed devices to their students, there is an enormous digital divide – technology access gap with our student demographic. In part, the observation is we cannot assume that all of our dual credit students have access to computers and reliable Internet service. HCC has been able to offer some Wi-Fi access to our students, but there is a greater need for this resource.

The HCC Dual Credit Program requires completion of several enrollment forms and parental permission. Obtaining these forms from school districts has been challenging, resulting in delays in our ability to enroll students. Another challenge prior to the COVID-19 pandemic was staffing courses in a timely manner. Approximately half of HCC instructors are high school embedded instructors and the others are either full-time or adjunct HCC faculty. Identifying HCC instructors has been a consistent challenge during the last five years. All of these considerations impact our ability to effectively navigate enrollment of our students.

#### **Current Challenges**

The pandemic has required a rapid transition to virtual learning. Access to technology and Internet services particularly proved challenging for many of our students. For example, students sharing devices with their siblings often have limited time to commit to coursework. Moreover, switching from in-person to online adversely impacted student

engagement where some students were either forced to take on other responsibilities at home or work longer hours to help make ends meet.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also made scheduling college courses that fit both high school and college schedules an even greater challenge. This is true especially with courses that require student engagement with either lab or hands-on instruction. Classes with lab requirements (*e.g.*, Biology, Culinary, Film/Video, Welding) remain a challenge, particularly as it concerns meeting the hands-on requirements. In certain cases, it was suggested that students receive an *Incomplete* at the end of the semester and hopefully complete their lab requirements in the Fall. The school district master calendars are all different and further complicate our efforts.

School districts also want face-to-face instruction, which is not an option until students return to campus on October 5<sup>th</sup>. This creates an adverse issue with meeting the time requirements necessary for lab-based/hands-on courses.

### **Ensuring Student Opportunities**

For the Fall 2020 semester, HCC developed flexible scheduling to meet the various needs of students. HCC elected to offer four different sessions to the various Independent School Districts (“ISDs”) we serve for their consideration, respectively, while planning for dual credit options for their students. Additionally, HCC is offering lab-classes with small groups (under eight students) and flex campus, which allows a combination of small class meetings in October with synchronous online instruction beginning in August.

The current environment has created an opportunity to have discussions about holistic advising for dual credit students. Some school districts are testing sites for the Texas Success Initiative (“TSI”), along with students making appointments to test on an HCC campus. The holistic placement has been an asset to place students for dual credit instruction. To address the class rank situation, some school districts changed the way they are calculating class rank so they will not be negatively impacted by the inability to complete hands-on courses due to the limitations of COVID-19.

School districts and HCC have continued calling students and parents to communicate all of the necessary dual credit information. This has been a high-touch process. HCC also extended deadlines for paperwork and schedules, so the school districts had the necessary time to gather information. HCC further endeavored to use alternate forms of testing to accept students. This process allowed more students to test remotely to alleviate additional burden on schools.

HCC also increased the use of technology to link students and parents with resources such as tutoring, counseling, advising, and library resources. Concurrently, school districts have provided access to technology through hotspots and devices, and HCC is also providing Wi-Fi access at all its locations for the greater community. With physical distancing guidelines in mind as well as the Texas heat, shady spots and covered parking garages also offer Wi-Fi access.

To support faculty and working in concert with the ISDs, HCC has provided extensive online training on the Learning Management System, as well as pedagogy for teaching in a virtual setting. HCC also matched faculty with mentors for continual support.

Although limited in application, HCC has been developing some 3D immersion videos for instructional purposes as well as exploring how to put the students in the virtual environment with immersion technology. Virtual simulation for lab-based courses that have previously required hands-on and face-to-face instruction is under review, as another measure to ensure student opportunity to earn college credit while in high school.

Ultimately, HCC has remained flexible and worked with ISDs to meet their requests on start times for the session as well as desired class start/end times along with being flexible in the mode of delivery. So, as school districts have made decisions regarding their schedules, we are able to finalize the meeting patterns and modalities for the dual credit classes, especially those occurring at a high school location.

Notwithstanding the challenges faced, particularly those created by the COVID-19 pandemic, HCC is working diligently with ISDs and others to ensure that students have access to a quality dual credit program.

### **SB 18**

HCC addresses SB 18 *which relates to the protection of expressive activities at public institutions of higher education. Monitor the process by which institutions of higher education implement policies to protect the expressive rights of persons guaranteed by the constitutions of the United States and of this state.*

To protect the expressive rights of persons while also maintaining an orderly and safe learning environment, HCC has updated its policies to reflect legislative changes in SB18. The Houston Community College (HCC) Board of Trustees reviewed and adopted model revisionary language from the Texas Association of School Boards during their May, June and August Board meetings. Specifically, six different policies have been updated to include recognition of the latest changes that require Colleges to ensure prioritization of expressive rights of persons while maintaining an orderly and safe learning environment.

Additional steps taken to monitor progress include: facility use agreements are reviewed to ensure policies aforementioned are cited and considered by College administrators and visitors (students, staff, and community members); a memo to supervisors noticing them of the changes to the policies and offering resources for any questions related to the adopted changes. Specifically, they were provided contact information from our Compliance Officer; notification to students of policy changes during student orientations, specifically, during freshmen and transfer orientations as required.

The College posts all changes to policies on its public facing site in a format that highlight the exact changes to alert the HCC Community of same.

Employees who work with student discipline will receive training in order to understand SB18 and the policies adopted by the board associated with this law.

A one-time report will be drafted, posted on our website and submitted no later than December 1, 2020 as required regarding the institution's implementation of the requirements.

## **SB 25**

*HCC addresses SB 25 which relates to measures to facilitate the transfer, academic progress, and timely graduation of students in public higher education. Monitor the process by which the Higher Education Coordinating Board adopts rules via negotiated rulemaking. Monitor the progress of institutions developing recommended course sequences and the progress of the feasibility study to implement statewide meta majors.*

HCC contends that innovative partnerships between community colleges and four-year institutions improve transferability. The evidence of this assertion is obvious in our existing partnerships with universities like UT-Tyler, TAMU, and UHD where seamless course transfers make a positive difference for our students. These partnerships not only improve transferability, they help advance the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board's 60x30TX Plan (*i.e.*, by 2030 at least 60 percent of persons between the ages of 25-34 will have a degree or certificate). For HCC, strategically partnering with our universities provides a viable opportunity to help our students timely meet the Plan's degree/certificate completion goal with a marketable skill, while successfully managing student debt.

As we continue to explore opportunities to improve transferability, HCC contends that the state should mandate the most common fields of study include the whole associate degree and require that regional councils be created to accomplish the establishment of the associate degree pathways. These recommendations will not only improve transferability, but also advance the 60x30TX Plan.

Of note, prior to the pandemic most provisions of SB 25 had not yet had the benefit of time in implementation to determine their effectiveness in the field. For example, the THECB rules for the requirement that students file a degree plan at 30 SCH (15 SCH for Dual Credit) went into effect on January 8, 2020 right before the pandemic. Another example, the course sequencing requirement is not required (per SB 25) until the 2021-22 academic year.

HCC has successfully established several strategic partnerships to improve transferability which include articulations with the University of Houston Downtown (UHD) in which HCC students complete their AAS Nursing degree and Texas core curriculum at HCC and seamlessly transfer to UHD to complete their BS Nursing degree; the University Texas at Tyler partnership resulted in an innovative four-year Engineering program that allows students to obtain a UT Tyler Engineering BS degree once they transfer to UT Tyler.

Notwithstanding the strategic partnerships we identify above as vehicles to improve transferability, we offer for your consideration the recommendations that follow: mandate that

the most common fields of study include the whole associate degree. These common fields of study must be guaranteed to transfer towards the related university major -- a faculty-led process to ensure oversight and rigor. An adoption by all Texas public institutions which would eliminate the need for most of approximately 70 2+2 transfer documents maintained at each university reducing costs, loss of credit, and student frustration. Regional councils could be created to facilitate and finalize each associate degree to be adopted by all Texas public higher education institutions thus building upon the work of the Guided Pathways ("GPS") initiative and establishing provisions for periodic adjustments to the associate degrees due to changing industry, accreditation, and state requirements.